

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 006462

SIPDIS

INFO ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015

TAGS: [PGOV TH](#)

SUBJECT: UNCERTAINTY OVER PUBLIC HEALTH MINISTER'S
RESIGNATION

REF: 2004 BANGKOK 5615

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN M. SUTTON

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Public Health Minister Dr. Suchai Charoenratanakul recently announced his resignation, effective at the end of this month, following several weeks of political in-fighting with another cabinet minister and party officials. The political fracas began earlier this month when Suchai removed a permanent secretary for alleged corruption and attempted to transfer 9 additional senior officials as part of a ministry shake-up. This sparked a row with his predecessor, powerful TRT faction leader and present Agriculture Minister Sudarat Keyuraphanthin. Sudarat won and speculation began over another Cabinet reshuffle in the near future. Reports in the Thai press on October 11 said that Thaksin, if unable to persuade Suchai to stay on, may opt to appoint an acting Minister of Health in lieu of a reshuffle. END SUMMARY.

WHEN DOCTORS BECOME POLITICIANS

2. (C) Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's appointment of Dr. Suchai as Public Health Minister marked the first time in 20 years that a medical doctor had been placed in the highest public health position in Thailand. Suchai had long been in good graces with the Shinawatra family, having been personal physician to the Prime Minister's mother-in-law for many years. Suchai's first six months on the job were uneventful, although rumors persisted of his inability to exert influence over subordinate officials within the Public Health Ministry.

3. (C) In early September, Dr. Suchai's frustration appeared to reach the breaking point over the failure of the Ministry to conclude a contract for the purchase of 232 ambulances, reportedly worth 464 million Baht (\$11.6 million USD). Dr. Suchai accused Health Ministry Permanent Secretary Vichai Tienthavorn of corruption involving the deal and immediately transferred him to an inactive post in the Prime Minister's office. Less than a week later, Dr. Suchai ordered the removal of 9 other senior officials within the Ministry, claiming they were not competent, although the less publicized reason is that they were reportedly not demonstrating sufficient loyalty to Dr. Suchai. The attempt to remove the 9 officials began while Thaksin was in the U.S. -- leaving the final disposition of the antagonists' fate until his return.

WHOA! NOT SO FAST!

4. (C) The removal of the Permanent Secretary and attempted transfer of the other 9 officials did not sit well with everyone. One cabinet member that did not approve of the transfer was Agricultural Minister Sudarat Keyuraphan, who was Dr. Suchai's predecessor in the Ministry of Public Health. Sudarat had personally promoted most of the removed officials and immediately complained to Thaksin upon his return from the U.S. Less obviously, Vichai had come to Sudarat's defense when she was under fire for last year's computer scandal (reftel), and political insiders see this as her returning the favor. In addition, the removed officials also accused Dr. Suchai of being incompetent and unable to handle his new position. Visibly unhappy that this move took place during his absence, the Prime Minister vetoed the transfer order and urged Dr. Suchai to reconsider the list.

LEAVING AT MONTH'S END?

5. (C) Dr. Suchai abruptly resigned just a few days after Thaksin encouraged him to give up the fight. Dr. Suchai, both embarrassed and frustrated that he lost the fight to run the Ministry as he saw fit, was visibly teary-eyed when he stated on October 5th &I am not a politician and accepted my office at the government's invitation, hence I am willing to sacrifice my job for the sake of public interest.8 Several Thai Senators have been quoted as describing the incident as blatant political interference that will ultimately hurt the Ministry's ability to function effectively. There is still speculation that Suchai will give in to Thaksin's persuasion and rescind his resignation. Other reports say that if Suchai remains determined to leave, Thaksin will appoint an

acting Minister of Health in lieu of another cabinet reshuffle. (Note: Factions within the TRT would likely welcome another reshuffle and the chance of increasing their shares of cabinet seats.)

16. (C) Comment: Although Thaksin has publicly claimed he wants Dr. Suchai to reconsider, he is also evidently unhappy that Dr. Suchai decided to resign without consulting with him first. Of more immediate concern for Thaksin, however, is the possibility that an aggrieved Dr. Suchai will use his remaining time as Public Health Minister to exact revenge by making more corruption allegations against ministry officials. With an investigation against Permanent Secretary Vichai already under way for the ambulance scandal, more announcements of corruption within the Public Health Ministry are the last thing Thaksin or the TRT needs. End Comment.
BOYCE